

CHAPTER - IV

CONCLUSIONS

An Anglo-Indian writer has to care for two cultures : his own and that of the land of India where he tries to take roots. This double concern inevitably affects his way of thinking and his choice of novelistic themes. Different kinds of 'encounters' result from his confrontation with the Indian reality. An Anglo-Indian novel is essentially the projection of British attitude towards India and Indians. Among the major confrontations dramatised in Anglo-Indian fiction, such names as Philip Meadows Taylor, Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and Paul Scott easily come to mind.

This dissertation assumes that every Anglo-Indian novelist worth the name has a peculiar sensibility that imposes certain restrictions on him as he faces the Indian reality. Hence one is either a 'realist' or a 'romanticist', 'an imperialist' or a 'liberal' as one tries to formulate one's impressions of the Indian experience in significant fiction.¹ The shape of these writers' sensibility is the outcome of the historical / political reality of the period of their Indian stay and their response to the things around them. Hence, ideally speaking, every writer of this genre has to react to the political climate of his time.²

Edward Thompson, who belonged to the early twentieth century (decade of 1920-30) has been studied here with special reference to two of his important novels.³ The study deals with his central concerns, attitudes and techniques as well as his peculiar sensibility which makes him a unique writer in the tradition of the genre.

Thompson had a long, memorable and creative contact with India which gives to his Indian impressions a tang of the authentic. Considered at one time an expert on India, Thompson tried to transcend the limits of race, religion, language and personal predilections by writing voluminously on India.⁴ Living in close vicinity of the Shantiniketan, he could easily befriend men like Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru.

Thompson's expository writings deal with the political turmoil of the last phase of the British Raj when Indian Nationalism, though nascent, had already started threatening the granite citadel of British imperialism. Naturally, as he turned to fiction, Thompson's views with all their prejudices and inhibitions got reflected in his creative writing.

An Indian Day (1927) and A Farewell to India (1931) both could be called historical novels as the main content of these books is essentially political. The socio-cultural and political ethos of the British India of the 1920s is presented concretely and convincingly in them. The agony and ecstasy of those hectic years of the swan song of imperialism find meaningful expression, especially in A Farewell to India. There is agony for the Britishers like Hamar and Alden and many others, who find it hard to accept the writing on the wall after the Nationalists started their struggle for freedom. The Indians like Dinabandhu and his friends however, enjoy the ecstatic pleasure at the discomfiture of the 'enemy camp'. Thompson shows a strong awareness of his grasp of the historical reality as he refers to the major events and

movements of the period from 1920 to 1930. His references to the Morley-Minto Reforms, Non-violent patriots, Extreme and Violent Nationalism, Round Table Conference, Dominion Status etc., however make both the novels highly 'documentary'.

His novels successfully convey the immediacy of the turbulent period they deal with, and make an interesting reading. The Nationalists in A Farewell to India do not remain dummy figures but come to life in a character like Dinabandhu. His vitriolic outbursts and rejoinders to Alden indicate Thompson's sure grasp of his material. The period of Nationalist Rising in the 20s comes to life with all its activity, suspense and anxiety. The long debates between Alden and Findlay on one hand and Jayanand Sadhu and Dinabandhu on the other, successfully convey the urgency of freedom for the Indians as well as the British reluctance to do so.

It is true that Thompson's 'material' is somewhat detrimental to his art. He has been criticised for lack of successful utilisation of it to produce works of art. Every Anglo-Indian novelist has to suffer comparison with E.M.Forster's classic A Passage to India. But Thompson is not necessarily seen in bad light after such comparison. A careful reading of Forster's novel would reveal a couple of weaknesses. To begin with, the main characters from the Indian side who play important role in the action are Muslims. The only Hindu, Prof. Godbole, comes nearer to caricature rather than a full-blooded character. Now, it is not

clear why Forster avoided portraying Hindus as important characters in his novel. "Why so many Muslims and so few Hindus?" asks Lionel Trilling.⁵ Nirad Chaudhari also takes Forster to task for excluding Hindus, the most important people in any consideration of India.⁶

Edward Thompson's novels, on the contrary, admirably portray the Hindu ethos with all its philosophical subtleties. His inwardness is revealed through his portrayal of Sadhu Jayanand. In the entire range of Anglo-Indian fiction, probably Thompson is the only writer who gives such a perceptive interpretation of Indian philosophy as he does in making his Findlay (An Indian Day), accepts the Hindu way of life and grafts it on to his Christian thought. His characters can meaningfully quote such Vedic prayers as 'Tat tvam Asi' or 'Agnim ile Purohitam'.

Secondly, whereas Forster fails to give any idea of the emerging political society in the form of Nationalist Rising in the twenties, the period of the action of his book, Thompson gives a detailed treatment to the activities of these firebrands. It is a measure of his greatness as a novelist that his eye misses nothing of their concern, anxiety and intense desire to throw the British out. Dinabandhu (A Farewell to India) is not made a figure of scorn although the weak points in his arguments are noted. In Sadhu Jayananda, Thompson creates another Indian character who commands respect of the Britishers like Alden and Findlay and Hamar (An Indian Day).

Thirdly, Forster's Indian characters, are shown to be 'childish' and his English characters 'coldly adult' as they lack humour.⁷ Here again, Thompson has better things to offer in his novels. Alden is full of fun, jokes and horseplay. In fact, his lightheartedness is an asset which helps him relieve the tension of his predicament. His parody of the Babu English used by some Indian characters never becomes an instrument of satire. It underlines, his humanity. Again, Forster neglects the fact that the civil services were manned by Indians gradually. Some scope should have been given to their portrayal in his novel.

Thompson's Kamalakant Neogyi and Deogharia present good and bad Indian civil servants . Both of them are seen from inside and with sensitivity rarely found in an Anglo-Indian novelist. The Sadhu Jayananda, in fact, is an ex-serviceman turned Sannyasi.

It is true that Thompson's novels, read like political dissertations because of their loose construction. But a novel like 'A Farewell to India' has ample fictional stuff in that its narrative steadily progresses creating elements of expectation, surprise and suspense as well as portraying characters and presenting situations with implicit comment on the socio-political scene. Unlike Forster, Thompson keeps himself tied to the problems in question, that is rise of nationalism, incompatibility between the races, poverty of India etc. He avoids touching the vast, universal entities and mystic heights and depths of A Passage to India as also its obtrusive symbolic overtones. Unlike Forster again, he does not keep political views at secondary or tertiary

level but makes them the warp and woof of his novels. Probably, he was writing a different kind of novel.⁸

His inwardness to Indian sensibility is manifest in his creative use of Indian expressions and subtle observations about the manners and mores of Indians. His novels abound with references to festivals and cultural events, fairs, and modes of worship dear to Indians, including the dark side of it. His sharp observation notes the inconsistencies and positive details in Indian life such as their dominating male ethic, attitude to death, and old age, their fatalism and religious conventions, their anxieties regarding one God, many Gods, their idol-worship and eroticism and finally the terror-inspiring aspect of the Goddess Kali. Thompson realizes that religion was a vital area of the cross-cultural encounter and he does not hesitate to expose the spiritual emptiness of the established Church. He boldly compares the religious vagaries of his own countrymen with the practice of the Hindus in a piquantly amusing manner.

As for his success in giving an exact expression to the all-pervading influence of Nature on Indian life, very few Anglo-Indian novelists can compete with Thompson. The very depressing Indian landscape with its ominous sense of decay also attracts him and the spirit of place becomes a great reality for his characters. His nature descriptions strike us as supreme examples of the remarkable capture of the spirit of the place. His use of Indian words to describe the flora and fauna and other areas of felt-life evinces his grasp of Indian reality. Sujit Mukherjee's observation

sounds very relevant when he says:

"(This) acute sensitiveness to the natural trembles perpetually on the brink of the supernatural, as if Thompson is on the verge of grasping a secret of the universe which perpetually eludes him."⁹

Thompson is not a prophet of doom for the Britishers in India although his characters experience a profound sense of frustration in their attempt to make themselves India's own. Both the novels end on a note of hope even after accepting the hopelessness of the situation.

Thompson may be placed on a lower scale as far as his artistry is concerned but one cannot forget the refreshingly new note that he strikes in Anglo-Indian fiction. Free from cant and prejudice and wishing to immerse himself with the organic life of India that he loved and respected, it was not for nothing that Mahatma Gandhi called him, "India's prisoner".

As far as his contribution to the Anglo-Indian novel is concerned, he can be said to have made it more open, more inward-looking than others could do. Traditionally he is compared with Forster and blamed for discursiveness and lack of technical skill. But Thompson's prosaic strategies such as long debates between characters suited him because he wrote with a purpose. The purpose was to bring about some kind of reconciliation between the English and Indians. In fact, Forster's "only connect" was also

his goal, but whereas Forster wrote a symbolic, poetic book on the problem, Thompson tries to diagnose the problem by analysing it in detail. As works of art his novels fail to make much impact but as a serious commentary on the Indo-British relations they are overwhelmingly honest and authentic. Thompson's importance as a politico-historical novelist of the last days of imperialism cannot be overstressed.



NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. These labels may be tentative but help us distinguish one novelist from another. The encounters could be named as follows : Taylor (Romantic), Kipling (Imperialistic), Forster and Thompson (Realistic), John Masters (Exotic), Paul Scott (Nostalgic).
See Allen J. Greenberger (1969).
2. Some Anglo-Indian novelists eschew politics and all social problems. They use India merely as a backdrop, concentrating on the universal entities such as birth, death, love etc. A writer like Rumer Godden , for example, avoids confrontation with socio-political reality. We could find the same thing in E.M. Forster.
3. The third Indian novel An End of Hours has been left out for reasons outlined in the Introduction.
4. The total number of books written by Thompson on India is 60.see Bibliography.
5. Lionel Trilling, E.M. Forster, A Study, Hogarth Press, 1944 (Rev.edn.1967).
6. Chaudhari says that Forster presents the Indians in his novel as "either perverted, clownish or queer characters . There are few delineations of the Indian character which are more insultingly condescending to self-respecting Indians, Muslim and Hindu, than those of this book".

See his article "On Understanding the Hindus", Encounter, XXIV, July, 1965.

7. See Andrew Shonfields, "The politics of Forster's India", Encounter, XXX, Jan, 1968.
8. See Mulk Raj Anand's article : "English Novels of the Twentieth Century on India" 1987, and Edward Thompson's rejoinder.
9. Sujit Mukherjee, (1993), p.133.